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S C E N E

No Apologies

At cigar dinners, tobacco and red meat
make a valiant comeback



BY JAY STULLER

it's a few clicks past 6:30 and my wife and I are seated at the bar of San Francisco's Cypress Club, an elegant restaurant in the Jackson Square Historic District. While Suzie sips champagne, I knock down a whiskey and watch clusters of men in rumpled business suits conversing in hushed voices. As one of them glances at his watch, a slender man with dark curly hair and a mustache appears. "Ma'am? Gentlemen?" he says. "Everything's ready for you."

We slip through a door near the back of the bar and head down a long flight of stairs and along a twist-

ing subterranean corridor. Off the passage, in a small room next to the wine cellar, is a table set for 12. And next to each plate, in tightly sealed plastic bags, is what has brought us here.

It's not an FDA-controlled substance, at least not yet. In the bags are cigars, fashioned in the Dominican Republic from tobacco of the highest quality. And tonight we mean to smoke them.

Actually, Suzie isn't here to puff

Cigars replace bathtub gin at a smoker in San Francisco's Cypress Club, ABOVE.

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S C E N E

on a stogie. She holds a dim view of tobacco, but is along because she's a good sport. Each of us—10 men and two women, most of whom have never met before—has paid \$85 for the opportunity to consume food so rich it could shorten our lives. We've also come for sublime wines and cognac. Most important, we're in an atmosphere where we can savor the cigars in peace, far from anti-smoking zealots.

The gathering is what's known as a cigar dinner, or smoker. A rather retro but rapidly growing passion, these events recall nothing so much as a Roaring Twenties speakeasy—especially when they're held in a place like the Cypress Club basement. The Prohibition analogy is apt. Today's increasingly smoke-free society is driving tobacco-lovers outdoors and underground. In Texas, penitentiaries no longer allow smoking, even on death row—ostensibly to protect the health of the condemned.

Cigar dinners were started at Boston's Ritz-Carlton hotel in 1986 by general manager Henry Schielein, who'd grown weary of the withering stares to which he and other cigar smokers were subjected. Two dozen men attended the first event, held in a private room.

It seems Schielein touched off a trend: these days, cigar dinners are held at upscale restaurants in most major U.S. cities. *Cigar Aficionado* magazine lists some 1,500 events annually, up from just a handful in 1992.

Ritz-Carltons around the country host lavish black-tie smokers several times a year. Even at \$200 per person, they're sold out months in advance. And at Morton's of Chicago, smokers are now the venerable steak house's most popular special event.

The first to clip the end off his

cigar, a Ramón Allones corona, and light up is Bob Brooks, a veteran S.F.P.D. officer who resembles Bill Cosby, another cigar aficionado. "I'm here simply because I like good cigars and good conversation with good people," he says. Officer Brooks assures us that we've yet to violate any federal, state, or local statutes.

Our meal, however, no doubt breaks most prudent dietary laws. We start with skate wing smothered in capers, parsley, and a lemon brown-butter vinaigrette, followed by duck liver flan with caramel blood-orange sauce and sautéed artichokes. It's all eased down by a velvety Shafer Merlot. Then a waiter arrives carrying a confit of pork in red wine sauce, to put us completely over the top.

"I'd like to hear why everyone enjoys cigars," announces John Diaz, an



Apéritif, digestif, and punctuation mark.

advertising executive. "In my case, it's a heritage thing; my father smoked them. And there's nothing like the taste of a fine cigar after a heavy meal. I don't find many places where you can share that enjoyment."

Insurance claims manager Ed Martin's initiation took place in 1962, through a South American co-worker whose wife had just given birth. "He offered me a cigar and I turned it down," recalls Martin. "But he explained that in his culture, it would be a great humiliation if I refused his